

Print workers denounce Fairfax closures

Australian unions block fight against media job destruction

Mike Head
20 June 2012

Trade unions covering printers and editorial staff have sprung into action over the past two days in a concerted effort to prevent a struggle by their members, and the rest of the working class, against the sweeping job destruction and restructuring measures unveiled by Australia's two largest media companies, Fairfax and News Ltd.

On Monday, Fairfax Media announced a wholesale restructuring of its operations, eliminating 1,900 jobs, mostly among journalists and printers, and foreshadowing the closure of major newspapers in favour of digital platforms. More than 400 printing and publishing workers will lose their jobs with the shutting of the company's two main printing plants, at Chullora in Sydney and Tullamarine in Melbourne. The editorial workforce on its two main mastheads—the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*—will be slashed by about a quarter, from roughly 800 to 600.

Today, Rupert Murdoch's News Ltd, which controls most of the other newspapers in the country, was due to announce deep cuts, involving more than 1,000 redundancies. Obviously consulted in advance, the Media Alliance union, which covers journalists and other editorial workers, yesterday said it had reached agreement with News Ltd on "consultation and redundancy processes" to implement any retrenchments.

Both the Media Alliance and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), which covers printing workers, yesterday opposed any mobilisation by their members against the Fairfax Media assault. At brief on-site meetings, they proposed no fight to stop the closures and redundancies, instead saying they would call on the company to meet with them to explain the size and

nature of the job losses.

In essence, the unions are appealing to the management to consult with them on the best means to impose the retrenchments. This has been the unions' role in many previous rounds of restructuring and layoffs, which have already destroyed hundreds of printing and editorial positions since the global financial crisis began in 2008.

The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) called a meeting today of the media industry unions to coordinate their responses. ACTU secretary Dave Oliver said the union movement was "extremely concerned" about "the lack of consultation about the changes and redundancies." The ACTU's intervention is in line with that of the federal Labor government, which has endorsed the "tough decisions" taken by Fairfax, claiming that they offered a "future" for media workers.

Media Alliance officials yesterday met senior Fairfax executives, who reportedly confirmed that the company would implement the editorial downsizing within 90 days. According to its media release, the union "emphasised that any process of redundancies should be voluntary." Notably, the union asked for more information on the proposed editorial changes, so that people could decide "whether to apply for redundancy." In other words, the union is once again working intimately with the management in the hope of convincing or pressuring sufficient staff members to accept redundancy packages in order to achieve Fairfax's cost-cutting targets.

At a meeting of print workers outside the Chullora plant in Sydney yesterday, AMWU print division national secretary Lorraine Cassin urged Fairfax to produce an

“open and transparent plan” to outline its shift to digital publication. She said the union would apply to the federal government’s Fair Work Australia industrial tribunal to enforce the “consultation clauses” in the union’s enterprise agreement with Fairfax. This is the same tribunal that polices the Labor government’s laws—introduced with the full support of the trade union leaders—banning all industrial action against retrenchments and closures, unless they occur during narrow three-yearly enterprise bargaining periods.

Speaking to the WSWS before and after the meeting, print workers said the Chullora workforce had already been decimated over the past few years, with the assistance of the union. The number of jobs in the press room had been halved, from about 90 to 45, during the past three years. Just two months ago, in a “massive restructuring,” 45 retrenchments had been imposed, including by forced redundancies, leaving a total workforce of just 230 workers on the site. Rotating 12-hour day and night shifts were also introduced, with most work done at night and on weekends, severely affecting workers’ personal lives.

After talks with the management, the AMWU had agreed to the cuts in April, joining the company in perpetrating the fraud that the sacrifices would save the remaining jobs at the plant.

Asked what the union had done about the forced redundancies, a printer who had worked at the plant for 16 years, said: “absolutely nothing ... that’s what unions do these days.” He added: “It is happening all over. A lot of different industries are cutting down on the workforce. It’s just about an everyday happening. Like Greece, we are all being made to pay for the financial crisis.”

Paul Mitchell, a post-press worker at Fairfax for nearly 37 years, said he would not be able to find work anywhere else now, because of the loss of thousands of jobs throughout printing and manufacturing. He accused the company of axing the two modern printing plants, both less than 17 years old, for purely financial reasons, not because of any loss of readers.

Mitchell responded to this reporter’s suggestion that the meeting should reject the closures, call for support throughout the working class, and make this fight a turning point in the struggle against mass retrenchments.

“That would be a very good thing to do, but a very hard thing to do in this environment. We certainly tried it in 1976, with the nine-week strike at the old Broadway plant in Sydney. We involved the postal workers and a lot of other unions nationwide but unfortunately they failed in that day.

“Now you have so much casualisation in the workforce, so many contractors, so much de-unionisation, that it makes it very hard. We have been virtually de-humanised. We have casuals here working three jobs, just to survive. What kind of life is that?”

Asked how all these changes had been imposed on workers, Mitchell commented: “That’s a big historical question.” He said it went back to the Accords struck between the unions and the Hawke and Keating Labor governments. He also said that workers had “successfully overthrown” the Howard conservative government in 2007, only to have the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments retain most of Howard’s anti-strike laws in the Fair Work legislation.

Mitchell said he had been following the events in Greece, and saw a connection to what was happening in Australia. “In my lifetime, I have never seen so many job losses. [Prime Minister Julia] Gillard says we have never had it so good, but good for whom? It looks like an old-fashioned 1930s-style depression coming on.”

Workers outside the Tullamarine plant in Melbourne told the WSWS yesterday that the closure would hit them very hard. “I’ll have to start looking for work,” an administration worker commented. He dismissed the Gillard government’s claim that Australia had been immunised from the global economic crisis. “That’s just not true... All these companies are closing down: unemployment is on the rise. I hope it doesn’t continue to get worse, but to be honest I believe it will.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact